

The World's Rarest initiative

In 2008 and 2009, the *Rare Birds Yearbooks* were published. These were produced in order to put a spotlight on the 190 or so most threatened birds in the world – those that are Critically Endangered – and to present the latest information about them in a form that was readily accessible to everyone. The aim was to increase awareness of the often dire situations faced by many of these species, and to show what each looks like with an accompanying photo or painting. With the rapid development of digital cameras and increased interest in photography among birders, scientists and explorers alike, many fantastic images were becoming available – and so the time seemed right to present these birds with stunning colour pictures. The publication of the *Yearbook* was intended to be annual in order to reflect changes in threat status and to summarize the most recent findings from dedicated researchers across the world.



BirdLife International, the global partnership of conservation organizations that acts as a 'watchdog' over bird species, was supportive of the *Rare Birds Yearbook* concept from the outset. BirdLife's exhaustive compilation of scientific information on each species, augmented with thousands of emails to researchers worldwide for updates, provided the authoritative basis for the Yearbooks. A photo competition was arranged in order to obtain images and the first *Rare Birds Yearbook* was published in 2008. This was followed a year later by the 2009 edition, which was also underpinned by a photo competition. Both photo competitions were mainly sponsored by the quality optics company Minox.

The *Rare Birds Yearbooks* were sold in over 40 countries. They were produced by a small team in Sweden and were successful in generating funds to support BirdLife's Preventing Extinctions Programme. However, the impact of the books outside Europe could have been greater. A fortuitous meeting between Erik Hirschfeld, editor of the *Rare Birds Yearbooks*, and Andy Swash, Managing Director of the British publisher *WILDGuides*, led to a proposal to change the scope of the project to encompass the species that are categorized as Endangered or Data Deficient, in addition to those that are Critically Endangered. *WILDGuides* have recently joined forces with Princeton University Press in the USA and this will help to ensure that the books they produce are available to more people, particularly in the Americas.

Given the increasing number of excellent bird photographs that are being taken, it was decided to produce a large format book featuring as many images of Endangered and Critically Endangered species as possible. This would also provide an opportunity to summarize their current status and the reasons for their being threatened, and to provide some information about their distribution and ecology. In order to make the book as accessible to as many people as possible, regardless of where the reader lives, the decision was made to divide it into eight sections: an introduction to the world's birds and the threats they face; and seven 'regional directories' covering all the species that are found there. A comprehensive review of the threat status of every bird species is undertaken every four years by BirdLife International, as the Red List authority for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The outcome of the most recent review was published in May 2012, and publication of this book has been timed to reflect the new categories. Sadly, 197 species are now categorized as Critically Endangered and 389 as Endangered, and four now only exist in captivity. In addition, 60 species are so poorly known that they are classified as Data Deficient.

The challenge in producing this book was to obtain photographs of as many of these 650 species as possible. To achieve this, an international photo competition was organized and run, with an attractive range of prizes on offer through the generous sponsorship of Minox, the publishers Lynx Edicions, *WILDGuides* and Princeton University Press, BirdLife International and World Migratory Bird Day. The response was astonishing, with over 3,500 photos submitted by over 300 photographers from around the world. The winning images all appear in this book, together with over 800 others. With these images, and the kind agreement of the photographers to re-use photos submitted for the *Rare Birds Yearbooks*, photos of 515 of the threatened species to be featured (87%) and 21 of the Data Deficient species were obtained and are presented here. For the threatened species that have never been photographed, either because they have rarely been seen or may in fact be extinct, or for which publishable photos could not be obtained (76 species), the highly acclaimed Polish artist Tomasz Cofta kindly agreed to produce an illustration. These amazing works of art are the result of many hours of painstaking attention to detail and provide, for the first time for many species, an indication of how they may appear (or have appeared) in life.

New information about the species covered in this book is coming to light every day. For this reason, readers are encouraged to visit the BirdLife website – www.birdlife.org – for the latest information and to subscribe to their newsletters.

